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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the pedagogy of reading comprehension in a second language focuses on learning strategies appropriate to achieving reading competence. Lexical strategies can be fostered by tolerating local errors and encouraging practice in the identification of specific features such as tense, part of speech, and cognation. Tasks that require the student to use inferential reasonsing or evaluative judgments develop comprehension of meaning. Attention to the global features of the grammar facilitates the recognition of word and phrase relationships within substantial structures. The role of orientational reference (deixis) as a feature of tests is discussed, the multiple use of texts (for differing tasks such as skimming and critical reading) is encouraged, and suggestions are offered regarding text selection. A bibliography is appended. (JB)

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LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION: THEORY AND PRACTICE

20

Reading a Second Language

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Foreign language courses in most colleges and universities in the United States do not teach reading comprehension explicitly. Instead, the ability to read is assumed to develop more or less automatically as a by-product of vocabulary and structural drills. At the same time, however, language teachers know that with the exception of a few students, this assumption is not confirmed in practice. Even after two years of language study, most students cannot read quickly or accurately enough to make independent use of their reading "skill."

Recent research in second language reading suggests that more productive strategies are already available. Many of the strategies we will be discussing can easily be incorporated into existing language programs. Taken as a whole, however, our examination of reading indicates the need for rethinking some of the basic assumptions of institutional language teaching--assumptions that have remained virtually unchanged since World War II.

In the last three decades, the language-teaching profession's most persuasive method packages--audiolingual, structural, etc.--have been predicated on the axioms of American structural linguistics. During this time, structuralist ideas and neo-behaviorist laboratory techniques have been translated tangibly into the language teacher's everyday vocabulary. Terms like "pattern drill," "choral response," "mimicry," and, perhaps most characteristically, "active and passive skills," all derive from the once commonly accepted aim of student conditioning. It is doubtful that the majority of teachers today think of their work in terms of stimulus-response conditioning, but our vocabulary incorporates precisely that view. Short of offering a critique of the entire legacy of behaviorism in language pedagogy, we will discuss briefly how the notion of "active and passive skills" operates against productive

treatment of reading. The rigid division of active and passive skills dictates an artificial hierarchy of values. Once the four-skills formula is accepted, the value scheme is a foregone conclusion. What respectable teacher or student could doubt the greater merit of the "active skills" --speaking and writing--over "passive" ones--listening and reading?

The passive skills, perhaps because they were assumed to involve little discernible "behavior," have been treated in practice mainly as preparations for their more easily observable counterparts. Given a text like "Johnny likes lots of jam," language teachers have not concerned themselves with how the student comes to understand it, or how to foster understanding. Instead, they concentrate on eliciting some noticeable reaction through questions like "What does Johnny like?" If the response accurately recapitulates the text, then one assumes the text has been understood. If the response is not an accurate recapitulation, e.g., "Johnny like jam," the observable errors are corrected. In neither case has the teacher attended to whether the text was understood, nor to what or whether the student thinks.

Improvement in the teaching of reading means finding strategies that go beyond recapitulation. It means looking critically at the concept of reading as a passive skill. Especially in the field of teaching English as a second language, teachers and researchers alike have expressed concern about the inadequacy of equating reading with passivity. For those who teach English as a second language, the problems are obvious. Their students are usually foreign nationals who often can already communicate orally and can write, but who are just as often not capable of reading at a level that enables them to qualify for high-paying jobs or to integrate themselves successfully into the English-speaking society by being able to read its books and newspapers.

In contrast, teachers of the standard foreign languages in colleges and universities are not faced with the problems of integrating socially and linguistically diverse students into a language community. Perhaps for this reason, they have been slow to draw an important inference from the experience of their colleagues in teaching English as a

second language, namely, that practice in the so-called active skills does not necessarily lead to the ability to understand speech and written texts. Only in the face of dwindling enrollments and increasing evidence challenging the validity of the four-skills hierarchy are alternatives being considered. These reconsiderations, in effect, reverse the priorities of the past decades. The major alternative currently being explored in foreign language teaching is that language comprehension should precede classroom demands for production.

The profession is involved in a major re-evaluation of foreign language teaching, and comprehension skills have become the focus of this re-evaluation, not because the so-called passive skills are all that can be hoped for but because convincing evidence indicates that comprehension is the real basis for all language learning, including production. This view is reflected in a variety of teaching methods. Winitz (1978), for example, proposes that students listen to tapes and identify visuals for an entire semester before ever speaking a word. Asher (1974) has students respond to commands silently in the initial weeks of instruction, but encourages them to speak spontaneously thereafter. Both these researchers beg the question as to the degree to which listening comprehension can be considered a basis for reading comprehension and as to whether reading should be taught--if not simultaneously --in some way similar to listening comprehension or in an entirely separate fashion.

At present, there are no definitive answers to these questions, only indications, and some experimentation that seems to support the key propositions of this paper, which are that

1. Reading is a complex ability that involves higher-order cognitive processes.

2. Students can be taught particular strategies of comprehension as early as the third or fourth week.

3. Second language teachers should consider fundamental changes in their selection and classroom treatment of written texts.

Why Read?

If comprehending a language is, as we believe, the real basis for learning that language, then language courses need to provide for as much exposure to written texts and oral discourse as possible. Written texts seem to offer the optimal conditions for the internalization of a new grammar and for the development of competence. Texts not only provide orthographic clues to vocabulary and syntax; they also afford the learner greater processing time than does spoken language. Written texts can also present a greater quantity and variety of vocabulary items in meaningful contexts than can live or recorded speech. Texts are portable. Students can read when class is not meeting and when language labs are closed. Because they involve greater processing time, texts can offer more opportunities to think and to solve problems in the language to be learned. For these reasons, written texts are virtually indispensable to the adult learner.

Understanding Texts

Recent studies provide valuable, though still incomplete, knowledge of what the comprehension of texts actually entails. Usually, when reading becomes difficult, foreign language teachers will agree with students that insufficient vocabulary is the greatest obstacle. Traditionally, foreign language vocabulary was supposed to be memorized. Either students memorized pairs of words from the foreign and the native language (e.g., maison:house) as in the grammar-translation method, or they memorized specimen sentences, as in the audiolingual and cognitive-code methods. However, memorization ultimately proves inefficient; the vocabulary of a language is simply too vast (Hirasawa and Markstein, 1974 and 1977). Furthermore, because meanings are functions of context, not of dictionary definitions, the one or two meanings committed to memory are not always appropriate. Twaddell (1972) sums up the problem as follows: "If we try to prepare [the foreign language learner] in advance for specific vocabulary needs for any real reading or listening, we are sure

to fail, and he is sure to be frustrated and discouraged." Basing her estimates on studies about the average amount of English vocabulary encountered by American college and high school students, Holley (1973) concludes that second language learners must contend with 80,000 to 120,000 words in the course of reading ungraded second language texts in areas of special study such as literature, science, history, or philosophy.

Lexical Strategies

Tolerance for Errors

Memorization of even 80,000 items is a hopelessly unrealistic learning objective. If memorization were the only way to learn vocabulary, reading would be an irrational pedagogical objective. Fortunately, there are alternative approaches. Reading for comprehension is a reasonable objective when learners know strategies for prediction and inference--strategies that capitalize on the built-in features of textual redundancy. Additionally, if the foreign language has many English cognates, guessing based on regular lexical similarity can also be productive. Inference, of course, increases the probability of error; thus tolerance of error is necessary if one encourages inference. Writing about native language readers, Smith asserts that signal detection theory shows that

> in identification tasks [such as reading] the proportion of correct responses for a given amount of information can within limits be selected by the perceiver, but the cost of increasing the proportion of correct responses is an increase in the number of errors. In other words, the more often you want to be right, the more you must tolerate being wrong (1971:24).

Foreign language students should be required to rely on prediction and inference to augment their limited knowledge of the language. The resultant errors are not, as it might seem, related exclusively to second language reading.

Goodman discusses reading in the native language:

> No readers read material they have not read before without errors . . . . in the reading process accurate use of all clues available would not only be slow and inefficient, but would actually lead the reader away from his primary goal, which is comprehension (1971: 139).

Accordingly, it would seem reasonable to reduce the learner's fear of error by removing the penalty for local errors and by stating plainly that some wrong inferences are unavoidable, but that without inferences, reading is impossible.

Problem Solving

Phillips (1975) conducted interviews with third and fourth semester college French students in an attempt to discover what students do when they read. In general, her results indicate that students approach reading as problem solving. She concludes that the subtasks that students undertake are (1) categorizing words grammatically, (2) recognizing cognates, (3) recognizing root words. Phillips' work suggests that students need to know which grammatical category each word belongs to. "Knowing that word X was a verb, a noun, or a modifier increased the reader's chances of guessing at its meaning" (p. 229). Tense distinctions, on the other hand, seem to be largely ignored during reading. Phillips explains this by noting that most sentences will not take on an improbable or impossible meaning when the reader assumes the wrong tense. A second explanation for the non-recognition of tense, she hypothesizes, is that most exercises that test reading demand only "low order learning"--that is, demand simple recapitulation through WH-questions of textual material, but do not encourage evaluation of the implications of the text. A question like "Where is John going?" elicits the oral response "John is going home"; although the tense of the response is correct, it does not reveal anything to the questioner about the meaning of the tense to the reader.

Phillips' analysis of subtasks, though probably not providing a complete list of relevant procedures, does serve

to suggest important objectives for reading in a second language. Her "grammatical categories," which include noun, verb, etc., are to be identified in reading on the basis of sentence syntax. Tense, on the other hand, which she finds to be less important, is primarily a function of morphology. These findings are, incidentally, in accord with the emphasis and precedence awarded syntax in modern linguistics, and, with other evidence, suggest to us that syntax might be profitably taught before morphology.

In the same way, explicit practice in recognizing cognates with the native language and practice in derivational principles of the foreign language should contribute to the growth of comprehension and should be undertaken before practice in morphological accuracy.

Beyond Lexis

It is necessary to distinguish subtasks like vocabulary identification from the total process of understanding the text. Comprehension of a text depends in part on the ability to recognize the meaning of some significant portion of the words that are included; the ability to identify all the vocabulary, however, does not lead automatically to comprehension. The same words may be rearranged to produce contrasting meanings, e.g., "The cat is on the mat" versus "The mat is on the cat." Moreover, identical series of words may be set in different contexts to yield different meanings: "Visiting relatives can be boring," for example. The aim of reading is not simply lexical identification; understanding the meaning of the text must also entail identification of sentence type and crucial relations among individual sentences, recognition of the type or genre of the text (whether it is a narrative, a report, an opinion, etc.), making reasonable inferences about the implications of the text, and so on. How can course materials and classroom strategies reflect these processes central to understanding texts?

Inference and Evaluation

Been suggests that students who answer "literal" comprehension questions (who, what, where, when) do not actually demonstrate that they understand the meaning of the text. Such questions merely focus on isolated lexical items. Been illustrates the point by using the sentence "Mrs. Tse-Ling flies to the Occident twice a year to buy fashionable clothes."

> A literal comprehension question would be "Where does Mrs. Tse-Ling go twice a year?" Most pupils would be able to answer this question from the grammatical clues supplied; however, a correct answer would give no indication as to whether the meaning of the Occident is understood or not (1975:237).

Been suggests that only "high-order" questions, which encourage students to use inferential reasoning or evaluative judgments, will encourage them to read for meaning. Inferential and evaluative questions should be introduced during the very first reading exercise; they can be readily framed at all stages so that learners can answer them. Been cites as examples the use of Yes/No questions and multiple choice:

> Inferential: Does Mrs. Tse-Ling have a lot of money?
>
> Evaluative: Mrs. Tse-Ling is interested in clothes/flying/traveling (1975:237).

One characteristic that "high-order" questions seem to have in common is a focus on general, or global, meaning rather than on detail. There may be several clues in a text indicating location, for example, or financial or social status. Been's inferential question illustrates how even a text of one line contains a number of indications that help a student infer whether or not Mrs. Tse-Ling has a lot of money. In cases like this, the student does not need to identify every word to make a reasonable

guess. Recognition of only the words "flies," "buy," "clothes," and "Occident" may lead to the assumption that Mrs. Tse-Ling is wealthy. Longer texts have a still greater incidence of redundancy that provides multiple clues to meaning.

Researchers are now examining the correlation between readers' strategies and their foreign language reading proficiency. Hosenfeld (1977, 1979) has developed a means of analyzing these strategies that lends confirmation to the idea that successful readers rely primarily on contextual reading based on inference and evaluation of the text as a whole. On the basis of non-directed interviews with high- and low-scoring readers, she concluded that successful readers kept the context of the passage in mind; read in broad phrases; skipped words viewed as unimportant to total phrase meaning; and skipped unknown words, using other words in the sentence as clues to their meaning. In contrast, the low-scoring group relied on glossary translation of individual words. Hosenfeld proposes that

> a distinguishing characteristic of successful and nonsuccessful readers is the priority system of their word-solving strategies. While looking up words in a glossary is the nonsuccessful reader's first and most frequent response, it is a successful reader's last and most infrequent response to unknown words (1977:121).

Hosenfeld's analysis of successful readers' strategies, Phillips' study of the subtasks of reading, and Been's emphasis on evaluation and inference are all based on a truism that is worth stating explicitly: texts are about something. Just as it makes sense to think of texts in terms of the ideas they present, it also makes sense to treat them in class in terms of these ideas, rather than exclusively or primarily in terms of the lexical items and structures they may contain. In this view, the structural features of a text are not there for their own sake but are there because they express the ideas. Accordingly, textual explanations and exercises coupled with class discussion are most productive when treatment of structural features leads to understanding the text, rather than merely assisting the teacher to evaluate the students' responses.

Treating texts in terms of their assertions, ideas, and implications encourages the learner to think in the new language. The first principle of such an approach is to encourage students to read for main ideas. This entails, in the beginning, no more than asking students to identify elements in the text that indicate what the text is about. Frequently, the title contains a hint. By identifying vocabulary items in the text with equivalent references, i.e., by taking advantage of internal textual redundancy, students can grasp the approximate significance of the title and can see the essential concept contained in a number of contextual variations.

Swaffar and Woodruff (1978) devised a series of one- to three-page texts for sight reading, with questions designed to encourage inference. Students are additionally asked to identify words or phrases in the text that substantiate their answer to an inferential or evaluative question. The exercises are designed to allow the students a range of feasible answers, rather than to test explicit definitions of one or two words in the text. For example, students in the second semester read a one-page news item in German entitled "Germany without Germans." The directions, also written in German, ask students to

1. Underline five sentences that provide information about foreign workers and their Sunday activities.

2. Circle five sentences that give indications about where Germans go on Sunday.

3. Select the sentence in the text that comes closest to articulating its main idea.

4. Sketch the foreign workers in their Sunday attire, illustrating the visual details described in the article.

None of these questions depends on the reader's knowing a particular word or structure. All treat meaning in terms of the whole text.

Course materials, particularly those intended for assigned texts, should be designed to encourage students to read for the main idea. Questions about texts should require

inferential thinking and critical evaluation, rather than patterned recapitulation of textual detail. Despite numerous studies indicating the necessity of such materials, few, if any, commercially available textbooks incorporate them at present.

Grammar as an Instrument of Communication

Initially, grammar explanations should be aids to comprehension and not blueprints for production. More research is needed to reveal which structural features of a text tend to contribute most to its comprehension. Some recent studies strongly suggest that the standard order of grammatical presentation in beginning textbooks may be exactly the reverse of what it should be to promote the growth of comprehension. Foreign language textbooks normally describe in detail word and phrase functions (e.g., noun and verb morphology, morphological agreement, article and adjective forms, comparatives, and so on). They even require students to master the production of these local functions before describing functions that involve the entire sentence or text (e.g., sentence types, conjunction, relative clause formation, and so forth). Yet, if most recent research is accurate, those functions of the target language's grammar most needed by the learner in the early stages for understanding speech and written texts may be precisely those that we have labeled global and that traditional grammar presentations treat last.

Rivers suggests that the reader must be able "to recognize rapidly sentence shape by identification of clues to question form, negation, coordination, subordination. He must recognize clues which indicate condition, purpose, temporal relationships" (1971:131). In practical terms, this means that not all grammatical features of a language are equal. Syntactic functions like those listed above, which determine meaning at the level of the sentence or text--in other words, those that have global relevance--are much more important for comprehension than functions like noun and verb morphology, which have only local relevance.

This last view is in accord with that of Burt and Kiparsky, who, working from mistakes made by ESL students, propose a hierarchy of errors based on the relative effect of such

errors on sentence comprehensibility. Global errors in English, which are high in their scheme, include mistakes relating to

1. connectors, especially meaningful ones;

2. distinctions between coordinate and relative clause constructions;

3. parallel structure in reduced coordinated clauses; and

4. tense continuity across clauses (1972:6-8).

In each of these categories, clause and larger functions are found to be more important for comprehension than word and phrase functions.

Wilson (1973) suggests that reading comprehension of English as a second language is enhanced when one treats sentence level functions early--i.e., there-insertion, passivization, and relativization. Berman (1975) finds that global features are what readers of English as a second language need most. She suggests emphasis on the following functions: nominalization, reduced relative clauses, pronominal reference, sentence connectors, "whether . . . or" constructions, negation, and using punctuation for clues to clause organization. Valdman suggests that syllabus design would be improved by "more appropriate sequencing of linguistic units" and suggests:

> Four directions may be followed in attempting to gauge relative pedagogical simplicity of pedagogical sequences: (1) frequency and utility; (2) intralingual analysis; (3) language acquisition universals; (4) learner systems (1977:22).

Krashen and Seliger report that

> adults may find a certain sequence of presentation inherently easier: [Bailey, Madden and Krashen 1974] found that adults . . . showed an invariant difficulty ordering for function words that was independent of first

> language and that agreed closely with the order found by Dulay and Burt [1974] for children. Thus far, the second language sequence does not seem to be based on any known principle of grammatical complexity or frequency (1975:179).

It is a long step from the isolation of a relatively small number of function words to a complete revision of the traditional sequences of grammar presentation; nevertheless, as these studies indicate, the theoretical and conceptual bases for classical sequences of presentation now may be inadequate for teaching-grammars. Guidelines are needed for a more adequate sequence.

If global functions are, as we claim, of primary importance in determining meaning, how is it that beginning students of a language are ever able to understand texts before they have had access to descriptions of global functions? They may, on the one hand, be developing their own notions of global structure by inference, or--and this seems more likely--they may be merely applying with mixed success the global features of their native language to the foreign language texts and discourses to which they are exposed. In either case, it seems reasonable that textbooks that presented global functions first would be of greater benefit to the learner than those presently available.

Orientational Reference as a Feature of Texts

The unit of the text or discourse has only recently come under scrutiny in linguistics, and application in the classroom of the tentative findings requires caution. For the present, we can offer our own--somewhat speculative--opinions about which referential features of texts might be most useful to students in the learning stages.

Understanding a text evidently depends on readers' understanding its relationship to their world of people and events. Orientational reference, often called "deixis," may be divided into three categories: reference of person, reference of time, and reference of place (Lyons 1968:275). In this view, understanding a text entails knowing which

persons are referred to, when and in what order the events occur, and the locations of various relevant persons and events. Different texts presumably employ these categories of reference in different ways and to different degrees, but it is difficult to imagine a text that employed none of them.

Reference of person. In order to understand a text in a foreign language, it may be necessary for students to make explicit the structure of reference in each category. Exercises can treat each category separately. Thus, for example, in order to make clear the reference to persons, exercises might direct the reader to identify the number of persons referred to in the text, and indicate how they may be identified--by name, attribute or whatever--and which ones are the most important. Identification of persons referred to in a text may entail not only attending to proper names and nouns, but also distinguishing between singular and plural noun phrases or verb phrases. Accordingly, numerical markers, which are local in the syntactic scheme, may be global in the semantic scheme of particular texts. Other features of formal structure may sometimes attain global relevance. A problem for teachers and designers of course materials is to identify which orientational features of texts are globally relevant.

Reference of time. In order to make explicit the text's structure of temporal reference, the reader must be able to sort through the flashbacks, montage techniques, and projections into the future that are characteristic not only of creative literature, but also of non-literary texts. Oller (1974) suggests that grasping the chronology of events, as opposed to the sequence by which events are narrated, is essential to comprehension. Information about time will normally be presented in adverbial sentence components and only rarely in verb morphology. It is important to note that construction of chronology also requires the reader to isolate one described event from the next. The global functions of reference of time depend more on temporal relations among the various events referred to than on the temporal relation of the text itself to the reader. Thus, verb tense, which is determined by the temporal relation of the text or discourse to the reader, need not be of global importance. For example, if the entire text is framed in past tense, then tense may

be of little global or textual significance, because it does not reflect the order of described events; on the other hand, if some verbs are in the present and some verbs are in the past, tense may attain global significance since it then may indicate temporal relations among sentences and events. Accordingly, questions and exercises should first direct the reader to identify the chronological relations among events before zeroing in on particular verb forms.

Reference of Place. Just as identification of chronology requires the reader to isolate the events referred to, so does the identification of locations. Place references establish the visual scene of an event and thus aid in making it comprehensible to the reader. Particularly important are changes of scene, and how these changes are linked to the persons and sequence of events to which the text makes reference. In our view, questions and exercises that require knowledge of the number of places referred to and how they are to be identified--questions like "How many places did John visit?" and "Which one did he like best?"--will aid comprehension more than will questions that are only local in scope, e.g., "Where did John go at 3 pm?"

Reference across the text. Orientational reference must be thought of as a feature of the text as a whole; not every sentence in the text will contain explicit reference to the particular persons, times, and places necessary for comprehension. A sentence like "He did it then and there" is, for example, meaningless until the reader can identify the referents of "he," "it," "then," and "there." Such elements, commonly called "prowords," derive meaning only through reference to other elements in the text. Real world reference in texts, then, depends on two major subtypes of reference: orientational reference and reference to elements elsewhere in the text, commonly referred to as "anaphora." Understanding pronouns and other prowords does not depend primarily on application of lexical rules (a dictionary will not reveal who the "he" of a text might be), but depends instead on a systematic pattern of inference characteristic of the language in question. Learning the language must eventually entail knowing this pattern, which will vary from the pattern of the native language in specified ways.

Until recently, it was usual to think of reading as a simple, specific task. In traditional language courses, reading meant word-by-word translation. In courses based on empiricist and behaviorist techniques, reading meant simply the passive reception of an encoded message--the least important of the "four skills." While the inadequacy of such limited concepts is now apparent, the number and complexity of the processes involved in comprehending texts makes it difficult to sketch a complete picture. Eskey states:

> The fact remains that all we know about the reading process now is some of the kinds of skills that go into good reading . . . . Since we do not know how successful readers can draw on several kinds of skills at once, but do know they can, and do know what the skills are, within limits, the best reading program at this particular time would be composed of instruction in the critical skills and plenty of practice in various kinds of reading (1973: 173).

What are the "critical skills"? How do we practice "various kinds of reading"? The introduction of so many variables does not make things easy for teachers or for designers of course materials. We have discussed strategies for comprehension that are not as yet reflected in most foreign language textbooks: making predictions and inferences, identifying main ideas, constructing an orientational framework, posing inferential ("high-order") questions, recognizing cognates, and using grammar as an aid to comprehension. How can it be determined which skill should be exercised and when? As knowledge of the sub-processes of reading grows, guidance for practical pedagogical decisions will, we assume, be forthcoming.

Multiple Use of Texts

At present the evidence seems to favor, as Eskey suggests, multiple use of texts. Courses should incorporate different kinds of reading for different kinds of texts.

Clarke and Silberstein have developed a hierarchy of four types of reading skills, based on the aims set forth for readers. They recommend that students not be assigned routinely to "read the text on pages 21-23," but instead that they be assigned to read the text with a particular purpose in mind--skimming, scanning, reading for thorough comprehension, or critical reading.

1. Skimming is quick reading for the general drift of a passage, typically to answer such questions as "Is this author for or against capital punishment?"

2. Scanning is a focussed search for specific information--usually a date, a number, or a place, typically to answer such questions as "What was the final score of the rugby match?"

3. Reading for thorough comprehension is reading in order to master the total message of the writer, both main points and supporting details. It is that stage of understanding at which the reader is able to paraphrase the author's ideas, but has not yet made a critical evaluation of those ideas.

4. Critical reading typically answers such questions as "For what purpose and for what audience is this intended?" or "Do you share the author's point of view?" (1977:143-44)

Clarke and Silberstein do not claim that these four kinds of tasks represent discrete cognitive processes; indeed, considerable overlap of cognitive function is self-evident. Critical reading, for example, could presumably entail skimming, scanning, and thorough comprehension. Likewise, it is not at all clear that critical reading is either cognitively or practically one step beyond thorough comprehension. One might argue that thorough comprehension of a text is actually impossible, because readers at any level can do no more than make tentative inferences about the author's purposes and presuppositions; therefore, thorough comprehension might also be taken to imply critical reading. The beginnings of a critical approach are also evident in the task of skimming: to determine whether an author is for or against capital

punishment may not always be an exercise in information retrieval, but may require readers who skim to make reasonable inferences on the basis of the way the author selects and presents facts.

Pierce discusses a distinction between reading for facts and reading for ideas, a distinction that adds depth and clarity to Clarke and Silberstein's four tasks. The task of scanning is directed at the recovery of what the text presents as facts. Skimming and critical reading both seek out ideas. Pierce gives an example to distinguish "fact" from "idea":

> Facts: Steve holds his book close to his face when he reads.
>
> He cannot read easy sentences from the blackboard.
>
> He often does not recognize his friends when he meets them in the hall.
>
> Idea: Steve probably needs glasses (1975:255).

When readers skim, they need to direct attention to ideas. When they scan, they look for particular facts. The ability to accomplish these two basic tasks depends on a knowledge of the language's rhetorical patterns, which may vary with the genre of the text, or with the individual author. Despite the evident variation in rhetorical patterns, adult readers can learn to make the kinds of distinctions required. Awareness of these distinctions, coupled with overt and deliberate practice in making them, will provide language students with valuable tools for understanding texts; these tools will, we believe, make it possible for students to go beyond their limited knowledge of syntax and vocabulary when reading.

The real value of Clarke and Silberstein's distinction among four kinds of reading tasks lies in its suitability as a frame for designing exercises that encourage application of the strategies we have discussed under the rubric "understanding texts." Because of their narrative or rhetorical structure, particular texts will turn out to be more or less suitable to a particular task; texts can be

selected on the basis of suitability to the task, or, conversely, exercises can be designed on the basis of what kind of task is appropriate to the text that has been selected.

Selecting Texts

Assessment of Difficulty

Because learners at any stage have an incomplete knowledge of the foreign language, teachers must be concerned with the difficulty of the reading material. Anderson asserts, "Learning is optimum when there is a close match between the ability of the learner and the difficulty of the material to be learned" (1971:35). This point of view is based on the common-sense notion that if learners cannot do the work, then they will not learn anything from the assignment. As an aid to determining the match between what learners can do and what they are asked to do, several procedures have been proposed. Anderson presents evidence associating percentage correct on item completion exercises (cloze tests) on passages taken from the text with the readers' ability to read that text.

> It may now be stated that if a pupil obtains a score above 53 percent on a cloze test, then the material is suitable for him to read on his own . . .; if he obtains between 44 and 53 percent, the material is suitable for instructional purposes . . .; and if he obtains less than 44 percent, the material is too difficult for the present stage (1971:41).

Owens (1971) proposes a similar procedure, stressing content words rather than the random sampling that is involved in the cloze procedure.

Chapman (1975) proposes seven criteria for determining the "readability" of a text: (1) length (four pages or less), (2) new word-density (texts contain relatively few words new to the readers), (3) average sentence length (less than thirteen running words), (4) style

(conversational and standard), (5) plot or organization (concrete and chronologically arranged), (6) interest value (the topic is appropriate to the cultural background of the readers), and (7) density (relatively few ideas are packed into a single paragraph). If any five of the above seven criteria are met, Chapman concludes--on the basis of a study of college students of German and Spanish in second and third semesters--that reading ease will result at that particular level.

It may eventually become possible, either by using cloze procedures or by feature identification, to develop a numerical index that expresses the inherent complexity of a text. However, it is doubtful, in our view, that inherent textual complexity would correlate significantly with the difficulty of the work of reading a text. First, not all learners have identical knowledge and interest at a given time, even in the same or identical courses. Determining an average level of interest or knowledge may not be as routine as computing complexity. Second, and more important, reading, as we have pointed out, is not a single task. A text that is easy to scan for specific information may be rather difficult to read critically.

Task Difficulty

Because reading involves many kinds of processes, it makes more sense, we believe, when selecting texts, to talk about the difficulty of the task than it does to talk about the inherent difficulty of the text. Thinking about texts in terms of the task, rather than strictly in terms of internal features, also helps to focus attention on the learners.

There are several practical advantages to choosing texts on the basis of tasks. Unedited materials can be used quite early in the course. When assigned skimming or scanning, learners in the early stages can make productive use of texts whose complexity would prevent any kind of thorough comprehension. Strategies for partial comprehension of texts, though quite useful in their own right, also train readers in such strategies as inference and prediction, which are ultimately essential for fluent reading.

Additionally, factors that influence task difficulty are not always functions of internal complexity. One might consider, by way of example, a fairy tale such as "Little Red Riding-Hood." The task of reading such a text will present fewer difficulties to American students, because of their familiarity with its orientational framework, than one of equivalent textual complexity taken from Buddhist mythology. The situation might be reversed for native Cambodians. American and Cambodian students, quite obviously, can be assumed to have different cultural backgrounds. With regard to reading fairy tales, there is an important specific difference in their knowledge. American students are not merely familiar with the cultural facts of fairy tales; they can also predict the way stories begin (once upon a time), the kinds of characters who are likely to show up, the ways in which the style of a fairy tale is likely to depart from the conventions of realism, and the kinds of details that are likely to be included.

Thus, in addition to quantitative measures like internal complexity, one must also consider qualitative factors when determining task difficulty. Genre is one such factor --whether or not the text is fiction; whether the fiction is fantastic (fairy tale, science fiction) or realistic (crime stories, etc.); whether the non-fiction is a journalistic report or opinion, a technical paper, a political essay; and so on. Conceivably, reading programs might be designed to aid readers in identifying typical rhetorical and topical patterns for particular genres. Second language and ESL readers that guide students along these lines are already appearing (Hirasawa and Markstein, 1974 and 1977).

Theme or topic can be an additional qualitative factor in determining task complexity. Texts about topics of immediate interest to students are more likely to be understood, other things being equal, than texts that are not. Although it is probably impossible to know in advance the various interests of a group of students, teachers and designers of course materials should be able to make reasonable guesses about their clients. In the same way, topics students already know about, either from personal experience or from previous reading in the course, make for easier and faster reading than do texts about unfamiliar topics.

Authors commonly assume some knowledge on the part of their readers; a text, regardless of its lack of internal complexity, may be incomprehensible to readers who do not share that knowledge, for they may not be able to construct a meaningful orientational frame. The knowledge readers may bring to a text is also impossible to predict with absolute certainty. But teachers and designers of materials should have some indication of what their students are likely to know about a given topic on the basis of national or regional culture, social class, generation, and so forth. Where it can be predicted lacking, essential background information can be presented in advance of the assignment. Furthermore, texts can be arranged in sequence and grouped by topic so that knowledge gained by reading early texts becomes the background for later ones.

Collections of readings selected on these criteria--internal textual complexity, the fit of the text to the task, genre, and student interests and background knowledge--will be quite different in nature from structurally graded readers. Structurally graded readers use texts as illustrations of particular structural and lexical features in order to provide practice in the use of these features. To that end, texts must often be simplified or composed ad hoc to include enough of the desired structural features. Such synthetic or extensively edited texts operate against the full development of reading comprehension.

There are serious arguments against using "simplified" texts in language courses. Honeyfield contends that simplification of English materials for the English language learner produces "material which differs significantly from normal English in the areas of information distribution, syntax, and communicative structure" and that "such material may lead students to develop reading strategies that are inappropriate for unsimplified English" (1977:431). By adhering strictly to vocabulary and structure lists, designers of materials tend to reduce the natural redundancy of the language. Honeyfield finds that by reducing the internal redundancy of a text, one reduces the possibilities for inference and encourages the notion that texts must be processed word by word. Since recent evidence agrees that no fluent reading takes place in this way, training students on simplified texts, though it may seem to have a pedagogical logic, is an

inefficient strategy for developing reading fluency. In sum, it seems probable that more effective foreign language reading anthologies can be designed in the following manner:

1. Select unedited texts.

2. Fit the text to the task, or vice versa.

3. Assess task difficulty according to

    a. textual complexity,

    b. probable student interest and background knowledge, and

    c. genre.

4. Provide practice in various kinds of reading tasks, e.g., skimming, scanning.

5. Provide practice in inferential thinking, keeping in mind

    a. internal textual redundancy,

    b. the text's orientational framework,

    c. students' background knowledge, and

    d. students' genre-based expectations.

As long as the task difficulty is kept consistent with students' abilities, we see no reason why authentic reading materials should not be introduced early in beginning courses. Perhaps as early as the third or fourth week, learners should begin to practice skimming and scanning, and some careful reading.

New Directions

The time is past, we believe, for thinking of the language teacher as someone who causes and shapes observable behavior.

More productive language courses can be made by regarding the teacher as someone who arranges the conditions for learning. For reading a foreign language, this means providing learners with strategies for understanding written texts that capitalize on what students already can do and already know. Texts can and should be selected on the basis of their content, rather than solely on the basis of vocabulary and structures. Texts can and should be treated in class and in exercises on the basis of their content. These aims are practical ones when teachers assign tasks consistent with their readers' abilities, such as those we have discussed, rather than demanding nothing more than accurate recapitulation.

The strategies that promise to do most to improve the teaching of reading cut against the ideological grain of courses where "active skills" are given precedence over the "passive skills." These same strategies would seem to fit better with courses designed to build knowledge of the language on the basis of comprehension. In such courses, reading is not assumed to be a discrete "skill," but instead a combination of various cognitive processes, with the written material being used to build a knowledge of the new language. Reading, if taught in this way, becomes anything but passive. Strategies we have discussed demand that readers apply inferential reasoning and critical thinking. If, in addition, the texts are valuable and interesting in their own right, they can then serve as the basis for creative production exercises. Interviews, dramatic improvisations, class discussions, and other activities can then have a more authentic foundation in the society and culture of the learners' new language.

We have written this essay because we believe reading has been neglected in foreign language programs. The profession can do better. The neglect has deprived language courses of what is perhaps their most valuable resource. Productive reading strategies convert written texts into indispensable tools for adult learners, whatever their aims. Texts greatly increase the learners' exposure to the language; at the same time, they provide material for thinking in the language.

Language teachers find themselves in an era of debate and transition. The design and practice of their courses must

be subject to criticism, correction, and refinement. Teachers must ask themselves whether the time is not overdue for foreign language teaching to rejoin the humanistic tradition by taking seriously the aims of development of knowledge and critical thinking. This means viewing the learner not as a cognitive tabula rasa, whose "language behavior" must be caused and shaped by skillful managers, but instead as a thinking individual whose considerable cognitive resources facilitate language learning. The emphasis in language study should rest, after all, on inquiry--the only respectable basis for humanistic study. Teaching approaches that foster critical thinking as a means of language learning seem to us definitely worth pursuing.

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